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ABSTRACT

To avoid the Anglo-Saxon culture mode, which dominates the current study of human communication in all contexts, the concept of communication competence can be examined from the perspective of Chinese culture. The conceptualization and empirical indicators used for the measurement of communication competence strongly reflect a Western cultural bias which shows a linear and mechanical obsession with cause and effect. Three ontological assumptions guide Chinese communication behaviors: human communication is always in a state of change and transformation; the transforming process of the universe revolves in an endless cycle; and this process has no ending. Confucianism is generally identified as the foundation of Chinese culture and tradition. To develop a harmoniously interdependent relationship in the communication process is the cardinal aim of Chinese culture. Five cardinal concepts form the foundation of a contingency model of communication competence: "Bian" (change), "Shih" (time), "Wei" (environment), "Ji" (the trace of movements), and "Chung Tao" (the way of means or appropriateness). "Cheng" represents the internal consistency of individuals by holding a sincere and honest mind to themselves and others. Confucian teachings further equip individuals with three keys for entering the state of "Tai": "Jen" (love), "Yi" (righteousness), and "Li" (respect for social norms). Human communication is a cyclic process in which the person, instead of message or other elements, is the focus. (Contains 42 references and a figure illustrating a Chinese model of communication competence.) (RS)

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A Chinese perspective of communication competence

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Abstract

The study develops a model of communication competence from the perspective of Chinese culture, especially from the viewpoints of Confucianism. Ontologically, the concept of "change" is used to explain the universe and all human behaviors as a dynamic and cyclic process. In order to be competent in communication an individual must know how to integrate and coordinate with this constant changing process. This study further delineates those elements relating to communication competence, including Shi, Wei, Ji, Chung Tao, Cheng, Jen, Yi, Li, and Tai.

A Chinese perspective of communication competence

Culture and communication have a reciprocally causal relationship which leads to different behavioral patterns in different contexts (Nakanishi, 1987). Culture not only conditions individuals' perceptions of reality, but also programs their language patterns. What, where and how individuals should talk is regulated by culture (Becker, 1986; Oliver, 1963). Culture is necessarily manifested in an individual's communication patterns, and communication in turn influences the structure of a culture.

Unfortunately, the current study of human communication is dominated by the Anglo-Saxon culture mode which is generalized to explain behaviors in other cultural contexts. Starosta (1993) claims that it's high time to deconstruct the current study of culture and communication to "expose fashionable orthodoxies" (p. 20). According to Starosta, "All published descriptions of communication should be taken to detail United States communication, perhaps Euro-American communication, unless explicitly validated elsewhere" (p. 24). He urges that the study of human communication must return to the concept of "culture" and examines its impact on various communication fora.

The study of communication competence shows no exception. It suffers from the dominance of Western thoughts. Worsely, the study of intercultural communication competence even leaves out the important role "culture" plays in the process of conceptualizing and measuring the concept of "competence". Research findings in this line of research are treated as universal. While in real

situations, those skills of communication competence turn out to be communication barriers in different cultural contexts. No wonder that Starosta (1993) further indicates that "Only when cultural dimensions of communication are understood may the field again choose distinct disciplinary directions," or the field should "caveat its results when it purports to talk of communication universals" (p 25). Based on previous arguments, the purpose of this study is to focus on the concept of communication competence by examining it from the perspective of Chinese culture. A Chinese model of communication competence is developed.

Conceptualization of Communication Competence

Three elements are commonly used to conceptualize communication competence: effectiveness, appropriateness and goal attainment (Backlund, 1978; Bochner & Kelly, 1974; Foote & Cottrell, 1955; Holland & Baird, 1968; Parks, 1976; Rubin, 1983; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984; Wiemann, 1977; Wiemann & Backlund, 1980). When applied to intercultural setting, the three elements are also used to conceptualize communication competence without infusing the potential impact of culture on the variation of the meaning of the construct (Chen, 1989, 1990; Hammer, 1989; Hammer, Gudykunst, & Wisemann, 1978; Ruben, 1976, 1977; Ruben & Kealey, 1979; Spitzberg, 1988; Wiseman & Abe, 1986). Based on this conceptualization, a skill orientation model becomes the dominant pattern for the study of communication competence in which scholars continue to search for a number of communication skills as the empirical indicators of communication competence. Those essential components of

communication competence include self-disclosure, descriptiveness, understanding, negotiation, social anxiety, interaction involvement, interaction management, behavioral flexibility, expressiveness, openness, listening, attentiveness, and adaptability (Hammer, 1989).

The conceptualization and empirical indicators used for the measurement of communication competence strongly reflect a Western culture bias which shows a linear and mechanic obsession with control and power, cause and effect in the study of communication (Thayer, 1987). The bias as well shows that we concern more with the medium or the message rather than the responsibility of people. We tend to conceive "people as made up of determined parts rather than as self-determined wholes" (Thayer, 1987, p. 38). To study communication competence from the perspective of Chinese culture draws a very different picture.

Three ontological assumptions guide Chinese communication behaviors (Chai & Chai, 1969). First, the universe is a great whole in which all is but a transitional process, with no fixed substance of its substratum. Human communication is then ever in a state of change and transformation. Second, the transforming process of the universe does not proceed onward, but revolves in an endless cycle. Human communication is then changing according to this cycle of the universe like the succession of day and night and the periodical ebb and flow of the tide. Third, there is no ending for the transforming process of the universe. The development of human relationship through communication is then never absolutely

completed or finished.

In this transforming, endless and cyclic communication process, the role of human being is vital. The process shows a spirit of enlightenment in which human beings, like other myriads in the universe, communicate with dignity and influence. It is called "the Supreme Harmony in unison" which produces a mutual and interdependent interaction. Man and man, and man and universe influence and are influenced by each other. This forms a continuous chain of natural sequences without consciously devaluing the dignity of communicator and communicatee (Fang, 1981; Cheng, 1987). Communication competence is then the ability to develop and keep the harmonious relationship between interactants in a continuously transforming process of mutual dependency. It is the ability of interactants for "being-communicated-with" (Thayer, 1987, p. 234).

A Model of Communication Competence

To develop a harmoniously interdependent relationship in the communication process is the cardinal idea of Chinese culture. The idea is equally emphasized by Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, and other philosophical schools in the Chinese history. However, in practice, Confucianism is the major force extending the idea into human affairs. Thus, Confucianism is generally identified as the foundation of Chinese culture tradition. Confucianism continues to guide Chinese communication behaviors. According to Confucianism, the ultimate goal of human behavior is to achieve "harmony" which leads Chinese people to pursue a conflict-free and group-oriented

system of human relations (Chen & Xiao, 1993). A model of communication competence is then developed based on the Confucian teachings.

The approach to the study of communication competence in Confucian teachings can be named "Ching Chuan Model of Communication Competence" or "Contingency Model of Communication Competence." Five cardinal concepts form the foundation of Chin Chuan Model of Communication competence: Bian (change), Shih (time), Wei (environment), Ji (the trace of movements), and Chung Tao (the way of mean or appropriateness). Bian is the ontological basis of human communication. As the three ontological assumptions previously mentioned, Confucian philosophy treats human communication as an endless and cyclic process in which no variable is fixed. According to the Book of Changes (Wilhelm, 1990), Bian is based on the dialectic interaction of two opposite but complementary forces: Yin and Yang. Yin represents the amiable, yielding or submissive attributes, and Yang unyielding or dominant attributes. Each force is a self-changing system which itself develops an internal transforming process. However, it is the connection of the two forces to form a complete and holistic system of human communication. All contradictions or conflicts ought to be resolved in this interactional process. Liu (1992) indicates that communication breakdown means the failure of resolving the contradictions or conflicts in the interactional process. In other words, "harmony" is the key to keeping communication going smoothly. Communication competence is linked to this process of

reducing mutual contradictions or conflicts by developing a harmonious atmosphere.

In sum, the idea of cyclic transforming process emphasizes the holistic orientation to human communication which represents a structure of dynamic balance among interactants. On the one hand, Confucianism considers each individual an independent and self-regulating transforming system; on the other hand, the process of harmoniously connecting two individual systems defines the meaning of life. Thus, a successful communication depends on interactants' ability to develop a harmonious connection in order to keep a healthy individual system (Liu, 1990). Confucian teachings specify Shi, Wei and Ji as the three concepts that determine a successful communication in the transforming process (Wu, 1964).

Shi refers to temporal contingencies. It is the ability to decide when is the appropriate time to initiate, maintain, and terminate an interaction verbally and nonverbally. As shown in the Book of Changes, a cyclic process can be portrayed by eight symbols accompanied with the 24-hour time period (Wilhem, 1979). Chen (thunder), paralleling with four thirty to seven thirty of the morning hours, symbolizing the arousing power for developing a new relationship with others. Sun (wind), seven thirty to ten thirty in the morning, symbolizing the continuation of relationship development by a gently penetrating effort. Li (fire), ten thirty to one thirty at noon, symbolizing the desire of interactants to be clinging to each other. Kun (earth), one thirty to four thirty in

the afternoon, symbolizing the reception of each other's relationship. Tui (lake), four thirty to seven thirty in the evening, symbolizing the joyous relationship developed by the interactants. Chien (heaven), seven thirty to ten thirty at night, symbolizing the sublime stage of success of relationship. Kan (water), ten thirty to one thirty at midnight, symbolizing the deterioration of relationship. Finally, Ken (mountain), one thirty to four thirty of the early morning hours, symbolizes keeping still without further endeavoring to develop or continue the relationship. Knowing the temporal relations and appropriately perform what one ought to act in different stages of relationship development is the function of Shih.

Wei refers to spatial contingencies. It broadly includes those static attributes like one's position, status, and the communication environment. It is the ability to figure out what is and where is appropriate to act. Lin (1988) indicates that, in the Confucianism-influenced societies, a successful communication is based on the hierarchical structure of human relationship which is regulated by Wu Lu (the Five Code of Ethics), including the relationships of ruler and subject, father and son, husband and wife, older brother and younger brother, and between friends. This hierarchical structure ensures an unequal and complementary relationship in the Chinese society. It maximizes differences in age, sex, role or status, and encourages an interdependent relationship between interactants (Condon, 1977).

Ji is the first imperceptible beginning of movement that shows

the trace of possible consequences of the ongoing interaction (Wilhem, 1990). Competent persons know what is hidden and what is evident. They are able to perceive the Ji and immediately take an appropriate action in the process of interaction. Thus, the ability to recognize Ji is a necessary condition for individuals to develop harmony and gain a feeling of complete security in interactions. Confucius specifies three examples for controlling Ji: (1) compose oneself before trying to move others, (2) rest and ease one's mind before speaking, and (3) make one's relations firm before asking for something from others.

Methodologically, the practice of Shih, Wei, and Ji in the real life is Chung Tao. Chung Tao is the guidepost of the action (Legge, 1955). Confucian teachings indicate that Cheng (sincerity) is the axis of Chung Tao which is sustained by three spokes: Jen (benevolence), Yi (righteousness), and Li (propriety). Therefore, a holistic system of communication competence model is completed (see Figure 1). According to Cheng (1983) and Tseng (1986), the model aims to reach an ideal state of Tai (peace) which is comprised of four components of competent communication: An (security), Ho (togetherness), Le (joy), and Li (benefit).

Insert Figure 1 About Here

Chung Tao is the way of being appropriate and fit to the communication situation (Tsen, 1986). It provides a principle that leads interactants to recognize Ji and know when (Shih) to behave

appropriately in order to fit in with environments (Wei). Confucian teachings stipulate that Cheng is the fundamental force to keep the wheel moving on Chung Tao.

Cheng represents the internal consistency of individuals by holding a sincere and honest mind to themselves and others. A sincere and honest mind is the basis of Kan Yin (wholehearted responding) which unites the two interactants as one (Wang, 1989; Wu, 1976). According to the Book of Change,

> When two people are at one in their inmost hearts, they shatter even the strength of iron or of bronze. And when two people understand each other in their inmost hearts, their words are sweet and strong, like the fragrance of orchids. (Wilhem, 1990, pp. 306)

A harmonious relationship is established through this symmetrical and congruent communication process. A state of equilibrium (Tai) is then reached.

Confucian teachings further equip individuals three keys for entering the state of Tai: Jen, Yi, and Li. Jen means love, trust, affection and benevolence to others through self-restraint and self-discipline (Chen & Chung, 1993). It requires individuals to be kind toward all people which in turn will generate warm feelings in interpersonal relationship (Chung, 1992). Yi refers to righteousness, loyalty and justice. It is the internal criterions of appropriateness of Jen functioning to guide the interpersonal behaviors by stipulating what one ought and ought not to do in the process social interactions. (Chen & Chung, 1993). Finally, Li

means rite, propriety and respect for social norms. It refers to the social norms and "the fundamental regulatory etiquette of human behavior" (Yum, 1988, p. 378). Li connects an individual character and social duties by following the rules of conduct and speech in communication.

Finally, the state of Tai represents the ideal goal of competent communication which delineates four criteria: a feeling of security (An), a feeling of togetherness (Ho), a joyful feeling of interacting (Le), and being beneficial from the interaction (Li).

Conclusion

The study of human communication cannot depart from the influence of culture. This study analyzes communication competence from the Chinese culture perspective, especially from the Confucian viewpoints. Ontologically, Confucianism uses the concept of "change" to explain the universe as a constant dynamic and cyclic process.

Applying to human communication, in order to integrate and coordinate with this constant changing process, Confucianism suggests that a competent person must fully recognize and acknowledge the first trace of all movements and temporal and spatial contingencies by following the way of mean or appropriateness through the practice of Jen, Yi and Li. Therefore, the environment of competent communication equates an equilibrium state of peace in which individuals retain a feeling of security, togetherness, joy and being beneficial in the process of interactions.

Based on these ideas, this study develops a humanistic model showing that human communication is a cyclic process in which people, instead of message or other elements, is the focus. This characteristic reveals the major difference between Chinese and Western viewpoints in the study of human communication.

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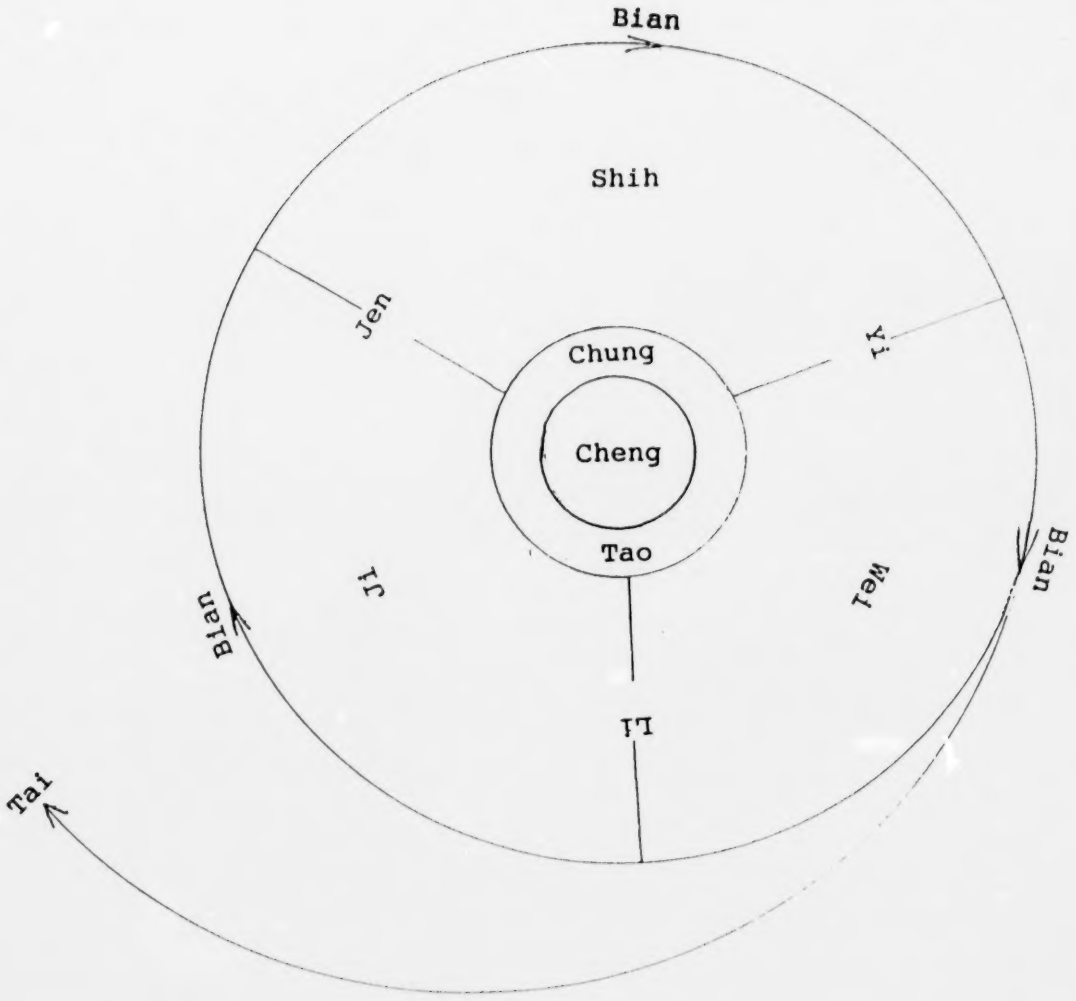

Figure 1. A Chinese Model of Communication Competence

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